

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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Homeland Committee Members Experience Nuclear, Bio War Games

WASHINGTON, DC (Tuesday, March 08, 2005)—At a two-day bipartisan conference in Wye River, Maryland, Chairman Christopher Cox (R-CA), Ranking Member Bennie Thompson (D-MS), and 28 of the 34 members of the House Homeland Security Committee participated in real-world simulations of both nuclear and biological terrorism. The exercises highlighted the critical issues the nation would face if terrorists were to acquire and deploy weapons capable of killing millions.

The nuclear terrorism exercise confronted the Members with the nightmare scenario of a 10-kiloton nuclear bomb, transported by truck in a lead-sealed container to evade radiation detection, being detonated at midday at Grand Central Station in New York. With initial estimates of half a million dead expected to rise dramatically, radical al-Qaeda terrorists from five countries on three continents credibly claimed responsibility. But the committee was required to decide what response to recommend to the bipartisan House leadership without any credible information on the origin of the material or if there were state involvement.

Members discussed ways to use intelligence to pinpoint responsibility for the attack, how to address the unfolding public and financial-market reactions to the catastrophe, the threat of further attacks, and the appropriate response if and when broader responsibility could be determined.

The bioterrorism exercise, "Atlantic Storm," was formulated by a team led by the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center for Biosecurity. It required members of the committee to confront real-time decisions in the face of a smallpox outbreak -- initially confined to Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Turkey -- for which terrorists claimed responsibility. As the committee considered such questions as whether to share limited U.S. smallpox vaccine stocks with the affected countries, it became clear that America itself was being hit with smallpox attacks. A few days into the disaster, terrorists followed up with anthrax attacks in major cities.

Members examined the roles of federal and state agencies, as well as international organizations such as the World Health Organization, the United Nations, NATO, and the European Union. They addressed questions including the allocation of medical resources, the dissemination of information to the media, and the best means of containing the spread of an infectious disease that has become a pandemic.

"These exercises underscored the fact that nuclear weapons, or bio weapons, in the hands of terrorists could pose an existential threat to the nation," Chairman Cox said. "The options that we will be left with after such an attack are woefully inadequate. Prevention of such attacks through

improved intelligence and interdiction of terrorists, and better preparation for such an attack should it occur, must be our highest priorities.”

“The purpose of these exercises was to help our Members focus in depth on strategies to prevent, and reduce the effects of, terrorism,” Chairman Cox continued. “These were not only effective exercises in their own right, but also gave the Committee an opportunity to build stronger working relationships among ourselves, and across party lines. These relationships will be vital as we work to support the mission of the Department of Homeland Security in the 109th Congress.”

"This opportunity allowed us to explore one of the critical threats facing our nation," Ranking Member Thompson added. "It also heightened our awareness of the Constitutional and civil liberties issues that must be considered when formulating a strategy against terrorism. It is also clear from this experience that our Committee must conduct rigorous oversight to address these threats."

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